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Bet on the Future?

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Before he died, my uncle and I got together frequently for lunch. We always began our conversations by talking about how we were doing financially. He had become quite wealthy by investing in telecommunications stocks shortly after World War II. My wife and I -- both social workers -- were not wealthy by his standards, but we were en route to saving and investing enough to retire comfortably. My uncle was relieved, I think, to know that I had enough money even though I had opted for a non-lucrative profession.

Towards the end of his life, he would often move our conversation to memories of his life during the Depression and in the Army Air Corps during WWII. He had been an airplane electrician in a "suicide" unit that flew the Burma Hump. I still vividly recall him telling me about his life in a tent in India during the monsoon when his clothes and boots never dried and he had to trudge through thick mud to get back and forth the planes he maintained.

During one of these conversations, it occurred to me that we had -- I had -- no right to assume that our lives were secure because of our "wise" investments. Yes, life in America has gotten better and better in the years after WWII, despite some blips here and there. But can we really assume that's how it will always be? Why not another great depression? Why not the rise of totalitarianism again? Why not a nuclear or genocidal holocaust? Why not a great environmental disaster? Why not a collapse of the computer system that keeps the world organized?

I was reminded of this as the stock market sputtered last week. I had been convinced that the American economy had recovered, that we are once again in an era of economic growth, that my retirement is secure, and that my daughter and her baby have good futures to look forward to.

Obviously, a bad month in the stock market doesn't mean much for the long-term -- except that you have to be a fool to believe that a full recovery is a sure thing.

And a bad economy is hardly the only threat to modern human life with all its comforts. I tend to think of these threats via movies and TV shows that portray alternative futures to peace on earth and plenty for all.

Road Warrior, for example, shows a post-nuclear holocaust world in which civilized survivors battle barbaric bikers for gasoline in a vast, denuded, desert landscape. The civilized survivors win thanks to the violence of an odd heroic figure -- himself a reclusive biker -- and to the violence of a child who has learned to take pleasure in killing enemies -- a child who later becomes the leader of the "civilized" group.

Or *Soylent Green*, which shows us a world in which an environmental disaster has destroyed protein sources from the sea. There's not enough to eat. The classes divide in a way that makes current talk of class warfare seem silly by comparison. Suicide is encouraged, and ultimately the species survives through repression of the have-nots, and cannibalism disguised through clever packaging.

Or *Clockwork Orange*, which shows a time when economic disparity has become so great that everyone lives in danger for their lives.

Or one of the versions of *Star Trek*, in which a life form called the "Borg" captures and then connects individuals electronically so that each becomes a cog in a vast, violent project to swallow up and incorporate all life forms they encounter as they wander in space. Not so different from the fantasy I sometimes have when I am in a public place and virtually everyone is listening to something on their smartphones. Over a billion people are now connected through Facebook. The NSA seems to be monitoring us all. Can *1984* be far behind? Is it already here unnoticed because we have entered into it voluntarily? Will we someday get a message through our earphones that we are all now under the control of Google? Just a fantasy. Or is it?

In general, I have the sense that, in the 21st century, post-Enlightenment humanity teeters on the edge of disaster. It is not that I feel hopeless about the future. I am happy that my daughter has married, has a child, may have more, and that she is developing a career focused on making the world better. I am encouraged that she and the social work and public health students I have taught in recent years are preparing to meet large social challenges. I am hopeful that human life will continue to improve after my death and the death of my generation.

But I am far from convinced that my hopes are well-based. I worry about leaders who seem more concerned about their political futures than the future of humanity. I worry about those who seem to fear small acts of terrorism more than they fear environmental disaster, nuclear holocaust, or economic catastrophe. I worry about those who have faith in the power of science and technology to overcome all the risks the human species will face in the 21st century, because some disasters, despite technological know-how, may be both deadly and irreversible. I worry about those who believe that everyone should share their faith in **their** God. And I worry about those who disparage the Enlightenment and the value of using intelligence rather than faith, feeling, or political loyalty alone to make major policy decisions.

Saving for the future as my uncle and I did was the right thing to do. But betting on the future? Not without far more dedication to making the world a better bet than it is at the moment.